

**STEPHENS COUNTY HOSPITAL  
TOCCOA, GEORGIA**

**AOP 23B**

**TITLE:** Patient Complaints/Patient Grievances

**EFFECTIVE DATE:** October, 2005

**LATEST REVISION DATE:** May, 2014

**LATEST REVIEW DATE:** January, 2016

**Policy**

A grievance is a formal or informal written or verbal complaint that is made to the hospital by a patient or the patient's representative regarding the following:

- Patient Care (when the complaint is not resolved at the time of the complaint by staff present)
- Abuse or neglect
- Issues related to the hospital's compliance with the CMS hospital conditions of participation
- Medicare beneficiary billing complaints related to rights and limitations

If a complaint is made in writing about any of the aforementioned issues, it is always considered a grievance. In addition, if the patient asks for the complaint to be handled as a grievance, it must be handled as such.

A patient care complaint that is not resolved at the time of the complaint by staff present (someone present or who can quickly be at the patient's location to resolve the complaint) would include any of the following:

- Complaint postponed for later resolution
- Complaint referred to other staff for later resolution
- Complaint that requires investigation
- Complaint that requires further actions for resolution

Any of the following complaints would not rise to the level of the regulatory definition of a grievance.

- Complaint resolved at the time of the complaint by staff present, including staff who are able to quickly be at the patient's location (such as Nursing, Administration, Nursing Supervisors, patient advocates, etc.)
- Most billing issues, unless it involves a Medicare beneficiary billing complaint related to rights

- Information from patient satisfaction surveys, unless a patient gives his or her name and asks for a response
- Verbal communication regarding patient care issues, by a patient or representative, that occurs after the patient is discharged, that would have routinely been handled by staff present if the communication had occurred during the stay or visit.

If it cannot be determined whether the complaint fits the regulatory definition of a grievance, the complaint should be treated as a grievance.

Patient complaints and grievances may be lodged either verbally or in writing to the attending nurse or other employee involved in care of the patient or to the Nursing Supervisor on duty. Grievances may also be lodged with the Administrator by calling the Administration office or they may be mailed to the Administrator. Patient grievances may also be lodged by contacting the Georgia Department of Human Resources, Office of Regulatory Services at the following address and telephone number.

2 Peachtree Street, NW  
Suite 33-250  
Atlanta, GA 30303

404-657-5726  
800-878-6442

An individual with concerns about patient care and safety at Stephens County Hospital that is not addressed by hospital management may contact the Joint Commission at 800-994-6610.

Each employee is expected to be receptive to receiving a complaint from a patient or the representative of a patient regarding the patient's care or perceived abuse or neglect. A patient complaint may be lodged either verbally or in writing. Any employee who receives a patient complaint should attempt to resolve the patient concern at that time. If it becomes clear that the patient complaint cannot be resolved at that point in time, the employee is to immediately involve his or her supervisor/manager in an effort to resolve the patient complaint. The supervisor/manager may consult with the Nursing Supervisor on duty or with the Administrator as necessary to resolve the complaint.

### **Examples Of Complaints And Grievances**

Example 1:

A patient complains that her noontime meal was beyond her reach. A staff member moves the tray closer and helps situate her so she can eat. She is satisfied. This is a complaint.

The same patient complains that three days in a row her noontime meal was left beyond her reach. This would require investigation as to why and, perhaps, referral to dietary. This is a grievance.

**Example 2:**

A visitor reports to the nurse that the patient's call light was on the floor when he arrived for a visit. The nurse places the call light within the patient's reach. He is satisfied. This is a complaint.

The same visitor reports that every time he visits, the call light is out of the patient's reach. This would require investigation as to why. This is a grievance.

**Example 3:**

A patient's family member complains to the charge nurse that her mother told her the nurse on duty had been "rough" with her. The complainant alleges there is unexplained bruising on the patient's back and arms. The charge nurse reassigns the nurse in question to other duties, removing her from contact with the patient. The family expresses satisfaction with the actions taken. The hospital takes no further action. Nevertheless, this would qualify as a grievance rather than a complaint. Alleged abuse should always be treated as a grievance and be investigated.

**Time Frame For A Response**

Stephens County Hospital will inform patients when to expect a response to a grievance. It is the goal of Stephens County Hospital to investigate, resolve, and respond to a grievance in no more than seven calendar days. However, some grievances may be complicated and require more time than seven calendar days. In these cases, patients or their representatives must be kept apprised of any delays. Patients or their representatives may be communicated with at this point by telephone, letter, or email.

**Written Response**

The final response to the patient or the patient's representative must be in writing if the complaint meets the regulatory definition of a grievance. The written response must state what steps have been taken and the actual results of the investigation. At a minimum, the written response must include the name of the hospital contact person, steps taken on behalf of the patient to investigate the grievance, results of the grievance process, and the date of completion. Explanations do not have to be so exhaustive or disclosing as to put Stephens County Hospital at legal risk.

Examples of steps taken on behalf of the patient to investigate a grievance might include any of the following:

- Reviewing the patient's medical record
- Reviewing hospital policies
- Interviewing staff involved in the incident
- Interviewing the patient or representatives
- Observing care

Examples of potential results of the grievance process might include any or all of the following:

- Updated policies or procedures
- Staff education
- Referral of the medical record and complaint for confidential peer review
- Updated forms to serve as reminders to staff
- Employee disciplinary action